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FILE ONLY

Yurchenko Case Leaving CIA With Black Eye

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WASHINGTON—Whether Vitaly Yurchenko was a brilliant Soviet agent or merely a confused and homesick man, the KGB officer's sudden decision to return to Moscow has given the CIA an aching black eye, Reagan Administration officials and members of Congress said Tuesday.

Senior administration officials insisted that Yurchenko could not have learned much about U.S. intelligence operations during his three months of interrogation.

"He gave us stuff; we didn't give him anything," Secretary of Defense Caspar W. Weinberger said. "There wasn't the slightest damage to us."

But former CIA officials and members of the Senate Intelligence Committee said the KGB man undoubtedly learned some U.S. secrets that will be valuable to Moscow, although the degree of damage has not yet been fully assessed.

Warning for Others

Perhaps more important, one former U.S. spy said, the KGB will use the strange saga of Vitaly Yurchenko to warn other potential defectors that "anyone who even thinks of putting his life on the line depending on the professionalism of U.S. intelligence organizations had better forget it."

While U.S. officials dismissed as absurd Yurchenko's charge that the CIA kidnapped, drugged and tortured him, the incident nevertheless complicates President Reagan's effort to raise human rights issues at his summit meeting with Soviet leader Mikhail S. Gorbachev in less than two weeks.

"The damage which may have been intended, if there was any, is in giving them a kind of talking point to try to embarrass the United States in a particularly important time," Weinberger conceded.

And the CIA's apparent bungling of the case exposed some of the agency's most secret operations and methods—and its managers' competence—to unwelcome public scrutiny.

"You're assured that the CIA knows what they're doing," said Sen. Patrick J. Leahy (D-Vt.), vice chairman of the Intelligence Committee. "That's an assumption that's now being questioned.

"Other than walking away with our credibility and our national honor, I don't see him walking away with a great deal," he said wryly.

Leahy and Sen. Dave Durenberger (R-Minn.), the panel's chairman, said they plan a full investigation of the CIA's handling of Yurchenko and will summon intelligence director William J. Casey for questioning.

According to U.S. officials, Yurchenko, the KGB officer in charge of Soviet espionage operations in North America, defected last July by walking into the U.S. Embassy in Rome. They said Yurchenko voluntarily submitted to extensive CIA debriefings and provided valuable information about Soviet spying.

But on Monday, Yurchenko surfaced inside the Soviet Embassy in Washington and told reporters that he had been kidnaped on the streets of Rome and held captive by the CIA until he managed to escape Saturday night.

Most intelligence experts said an apparent defector like Yurchenko should not have learned much about CIA operations in Moscow—at least, not if his American interrogators were careful. But he would clearly have learned a great deal about the CIA's methods in handling defectors, information that could be useful to the KGB in either planting false defectors or recapturing real ones.

"In talking to him, we would be careful in protecting the identities of our people (in the Soviet Union)," former CIA chief William E. Colby said. "We wouldn't be talking about our operations—we would ask him about theirs. . . . We would be very cautious about what we would tell him or let him know, particularly in three months."

Former Deputy Director George Carver was less sanguine.

"It's aggravating. It shouldn't have happened," he said. "It is going to provide the KGB with a lot of details about agency practices and locations of safehouses and other information you would just as soon the KGB didn't have.

"More damaging is the KGB's message to their own people that anybody who is thinking about leaving Mother Russia had better forget it, because our arm is very long and we will get you back," Carver said. "Also, anyone who even thinks of putting his life on the line depending on the professionalism of U.S. intelligence organizations had better forget it—the U.S. talks a better intelligence game than it plays. That image is a lot easier to get than it is to get rid of."

Much of the debate over the amount of damage Yurchenko did turns on the unresolved question whether he was a genuine defector who had a change of heart, or a deliberate KGB "plant" who buffaloed the CIA's counterintelligence branch for three months.

The experts remained divided on that issue. On the Senate committee, Republican Durenberger said he agrees with the CIA's contention that the Russian was "a very troubled man"; Democrat Leahy said he had "a nagging and persistent feeling" that Yurchenko was a phony.

Either way, however, Congress planned to call Casey and his aides for questioning—a process that will inevitably expose the agency to closer public scrutiny of its operations and management than the CIA chief likes. The case has already subjected the intelligence agency to more public criticism of its competence in basic spycraft than any operation since congressional investigations of the mid-1970s revealed bungled assassination plots and other scandals.

"If it turns out that he was a double agent, then, of course, there was a great problem and a grave mistake," Leahy said. "If he was a real defector, the question is why

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was he out having dinner just a short distance from Mount Alto (the Soviet Embassy compound), and he just walked off."

"They ought never to have let it be known that they had him and they should not have let things dribble out into the press about what he was telling them," said Sen. Daniel Patrick Moynihan (D-N.Y.), a former member of the Intelligence Committee. "That's the kind of self-promotion that an intelligence agency very wisely avoids."

"It was as unprofessional as you can get," charged a former top CIA official who refuses to allow himself ever to be quoted by name. "It's a basic problem of management over there."

Durenberger and Carver warned that some of the criticism may be undeserved.

"You've got to keep in mind that something like one out of every two defectors goes home," the Senate chairman said.

"The sun will still rise in the east and set in the west," said Carver. "There is going to be some obvious embarrassment in the CIA, and some people will raise some questions about the professional competence of their colleagues—perhaps unfairly."

Yurchenko's turnabout failed to cause any clear damage in one area: the preparations for the Reagan-Gorbachev summit in Geneva later this month. Secretary of State George P. Shultz discussed the affair briefly with Gorbachev during their meeting in Moscow on Tuesday, but aides indicated it did not disrupt the discussions.

One U.S. intelligence official said Yurchenko appeared to steer away from accusing Reagan of wrongdoing in his dramatic news conference Monday—"so it's not embarrassment they're trying to accomplish."

In any case, the White House official said, "We won't be provoked into anything that could cause problems leading up to the summit, whether or not that's what the Soviets want to do."

"We are proceeding with our preparations for the meeting," State Department spokesman Charles Redman said. "We already have stated our desire that President Reagan's meeting with (Communist Party) General Secretary Gorbachev should set an agenda for more productive U.S.-Soviet relations in the coming years. . . . We do not believe that the Yurchenko case should affect these plans."

Times staff writers Maura Dolan and James Gerstenzang contributed to this report.

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